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Twine's revolution:

Democratization, depoliticization, and the queering of game design

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the *Twine* application's "revolution" in order to assess the consequences and challenges of the democratization of game design for those often marginalized from the mainstream digital games industry. Through a review of Twine as a tool, Twine games and design practices, and the community that has formed around Twine production, I examine the challenges Twine makes to the hegemonic context of digital game production. Through their subversion of assumed norms in game design and distribution, Twine game-makers provide queer alternatives to traditional digital game culture. At the same time, they face a number of significant challenges, including the delegitimization and depoliticization of their work, the co-optation of their labour, and the risks entailed living within alternative, anti-capitalist economies. I conclude with a discussion of the tenuous role of queerness in game design and the responsibilities of games scholars in discussions of gaming on the periphery.

KEYWORDS: *Twine, Queer, Indie, Subversion, Capitalism*

INTRODUCTION

The focus of the 2013 Game Developer's Conference on inclusion was nearly inevitable after 2012, a year that will go down in game history as the one where harassment, sexism, and misogyny came under the greatest scrutiny across the spectrum of academic, games, and mainstream media venues. Celebratory discourse reigned as many noted the triumph of the move of discussions of oppression, difference, and marginalization from the silo of "women in games" to a broader audience, with many voices tackling "toxic game culture" (Consalvo, 2012).

Interestingly, this emphasis on inclusivity is often linked directly or implicitly to independent games production as a bastion for alternative or experimental modes of operation in games culture. In this way, the attention bestowed upon female-identified game developers, journalists, and academics as they take the stage to talk about intersecting forms of oppression within games production and culture demonstrates in many ways how indie game-making in particular is mapped in opposition to the ideology of the mainstream industry, offering enlightenment in the face of market-based efficiencies.

Research has shown that independent game development, however, is marked by many of the same conditions that govern the precarious cycles of production characterizing big business in games, from crunch time to contract labour to exclusionary cultures that still marginalize many people (Fisher & Harvey, 2012; Harvey & Fisher, 2012). While indie and mainstream game cultures are often positioned as oppositional and at different ends of the spectrum, in terms of working conditions, end products, and types of makers, in many ways they share similar notions of success. And of course, independent games production, and the “indie” label, are only provisionally defined, with its categorization a subject of great debate (Ruffino, 2013).

However, if a great deal of what is called indie development is mobilized as oppositional while still supporting the basic premises of mainstream games culture, there are also significant sites, instances, and moments that serve to challenge not only big industry but also the hegemonic context that shapes it and defines normative understandings of game design processes, outcomes, and successes. Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce (2007) call this the “hegemony of play”, a set of conventions that value particular configurations of the production context, technological developments, and play practices at the exclusion of others, resulting in a narrowly constituted power elite of by-and-large white male game-makers and game-players.

In this paper, I consider one such site, the community of *Twine* games production. While *Twine* as a tool for the creation of interactive fiction has existed for several years, its profile has increased a great deal in recent months, particularly with the visibility of game designer and writer Anna Anthropy and media coverage of the so-called *Twine* Revolution. I argue that the *Twine* community, the response to its recent radicalization, and the issues related to democratization and politicization that it provokes make an important challenge to the normative framing of indie and mainstream as totalizing categories. Significantly, this “*Twine* Revolution” queers the norms of game design, from who does it to what they make to what success looks like. Queerness as a concept here is informed by Halberstam’s (2011) work on the counter-hegemonic constructions of success and failure in animation and other “low theory” texts, which she describes as “central to the struggle against

corporate domination... the queer is not represented as a singularity but as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock” (p.29). But does this queering offer the promise of providing resistant alternatives to mainstream games and game production (Anthropy, 2012a; Pedercini, 2012, Westecott, 2013), challenging the foundations of the hegemony of play that devalue a range of play forms in its risk-averse attunement to the market? This paper explores that question through a discussion of Twine as a game design tool, a community, a topic of discussion within digital game culture, and a revolution.

TWINE AS DESIGN TOOL AND COMMUNITY

“twine succeeded precisely because of its violence--because it was suited for guerilla warfare--a cheap, disposable weapon of underdogs”¹.

A great deal of Twine's power lies in its multiple axes of accessibility. It is a free to download, open-source tool for the creation of texts that export to HTML, requiring only an Internet connection to share and access. The output of Twine is a file so small that it can be emailed or copied to small capacity storage devices, including a CD-ROM or even a floppy disc. Created by writer and developer Chris Klimas in 2009, Twine can be used on both Windows and Mac systems, as well as Linux with a few modifications to the source code. Aside from its system agnosticism as well as the minimal storage and hardware specifications required to acquire, use and distribute the final products of Twine, it is accessible because of its simple graphical editing tools. Twine's editing interface provides a visual map of the connections and choices the user makes, easily understood error messages for unconnected sections of the text, and the fluid ability to switch between working and published mode and back again, allowing for rapid testing.

Twine was not originally envisioned as a game design tool. In the three video tutorials created by Klimas to help get users started², he consistently refers to the outputs of Twine as “stories” akin to non-linear Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) texts, and to those who engage with them as “readers”. In many circles Twine is referred to as a system for authoring, a tool for the creation of interactive stories, and a “choose your own adventure-maker” (Bernardi, 2013). Because Twine was not conceptualized as a technology of game-making, assumptions about what these kinds of tools do are not embedded in its structure and paratexts in the same way as other dedicated digital game design programs. Instead, Twine is a program that has been adopted by rather than targeted at digital game-makers, its affordances identified rather than prescribed as useful for the creation of games that often do not resemble those made in suites of programs expressly intended for digital game design.

1. Porpentine (2013, 18 May). twine succeeded precisely because of its violence--because it was suited for guerilla warfare--a cheap, disposable weapon of underdogs [Twitter post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/aliendovecote/status/335845879229595648>.

2. These videos as well as more information about Twine from Chris Klimas are available at <http://gimcrackd.com/etc/src/>.

While Twine has been available online since 2009, many credit game designer and writer Anna Anthropy with the Twine Revolution and the recent surge in attention paid to it (Bernardi, 2013; Ellison, 2013; Keogh, 2013), as she has promoted its ease of use in contrast to the multiple barriers to entry to be found in using other kinds of game design tools, including financial and technical-based exclusions (Anthropy, 2012b). Unlike other kinds of software recommended for first-time game designers such as Stencyl and GameMaker (Quinn, 2013), Twine does not require knowledge of even basic programming concepts such as if-then constructs. Instead, its WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) interface offers a fairly intuitive entry point into creating linked passages. A bevy of resources made available by prolific Twine designers including Anthropy³ and Porpentine⁴ provide details on more technically complex ways to engage with the affordances of the tool, including CSS and HTML modifications.

These collections of resources indicate the character of the community of those making and sharing Twine games. The message that accompanies these and other repositories of games, techniques, and sources of help and advice is that everyone can make games. Finances, programming skills, or any other material conditions need not act as a barrier. Underlying that universalist position is the argument that the hegemonic identity of the digital game designer⁵ can (and must) be broadened, as demonstrated by the subtitle of Anthropy's book (2012a). By highlighting the multiple facets of Twine's accessibility, those who use and promote it also trouble the fairly rigid distinctions that qualify some as game designers while restricting a great deal of others, particularly those without the economic and technical capital required to engage in 3D game design, for instance. And in never qualifying the end product of Twine development as in any way different from the end product of a large, multinational game design company-- as a game like any other digital game-- these designers provide a subversive lens through which to engage with game design and the identity of "digital game designer".

This subversion becomes particularly evident when we consider the kinds of games being produced using Twine and shared with the Twine community. A central meeting place for Twine game-makers is TwineHub⁶, which was itself created within Twine. This is an important site to consider, as it does more than indicate a community ethos of sharing and supporting other Twine developers. The presumptions about what constitutes a fundamental game design process become clear in the tutorials of many development programs; in the case of several of the above-mentioned tools this includes shooting a projectile from one sprite to, or more accurately, at another. The community *fora* for Stencyl, GameMaker, and other programs for beginners and amateurs demonstrate the prevalence of creating games premised on these activities. Collections of Twine games, such as the TwineHub gallery, on the other hand, evince a different set of preferred affordances.

3. Anthropy's Twine guide is located at <http://www.auntiepixelante.com/twine/>

4. Porpentine's Twine guide is located at http://aliendovecote.com/?page_id=4047.

5. According to Fron, Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce (2011) this would be a power elite of White and Asian men.

6. TwineHub is located at <http://twinehub.weebly.com/>, and it provides links to recommended games and stories as well as resources for using Twine.

The character of these games is so novel that many of have taken to using the phrase “personal games” to describe them (Alexander, 2013a; Bernardi, 2013), a label that many game designers seem to have cautiously embraced⁷. The “personal” in personal games refers to both their stories and often individual production. Through this personal perspective, Twine games often challenge many of the dominant norms and values of mainstream game design, from process to mechanics to content. In terms of process, they challenge the notion that games take many years, large teams, and depths of technological prowess to create. To wit, Courtney Stanton, founder of Women in Games Boston, made a new Twine game every single day in December 2012 (Bernardi, 2013). In terms of mechanics, these games tend to work without avatars, artificial intelligence, graphical environments, and in many cases winning conditions, opponents, and engrained game design values such as balance and challenge. Playing even a handful of these games demonstrates the ways in which the content of Twine games diverges from the traditional fare of the mainstream industry. For instance, Rob Simmons' *Enough* can take under two minutes to play in its entirety. All the pleading emoticons by Finny grapples with the grounds for self-harm while merritt kopas' *Conversations with My Mother* lets you change the outcome of a familial chat in simple but powerful ways. Anthropy describes a great deal of her work as “smutty”, exemplified by *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entrée* and *Sex Cops of Tickle City*. Aside from the personal content of these games, Twine games challenge mainstream standards by subverting the celebration of difficulty, in both production and play, as they are often quick to both make and play. This is significant as the valuation of difficulty has been demonstrated to be highly gendered (Shaw, 2013) and often exclusionary when tied to the valuation of ‘hardcore’ play (Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007; Harvey, 2011). In sum, through their radical, experimental, and non-normative development, stories, and mechanics, Twine games offer queer alternatives to the interactive entertainment of the mainstream.

These games are the consequence of Twine's revolution, the queering of the hegemonic culture of game design. This queerness stems from Twine's accessibility, and its resulting use by a wide range of people, including women, genderqueer, and trans* people, poor people, older people, younger people, people of color and first-time game-makers, among others (Anthropy, 2012a, 2012c). Twine queers game design through its inclusion of those typically excluded from the traditional training and education of game-makers; as Anthropy says “twine has become fertile territory for marginalized voices to grow” (2012c). Significantly, this means that most vocal users and proponents of Twine are those who are so rarely found in the mainstream industry spaces of digital game design, raising the visibility of queer and other marginalized game-makers in the process.

7. For instance, there was an entire panel of designers at the April 2013 Different Games conference, including Anthropy, Mattie Brice, Robert Yang, and Haitham Ennasr, discussing the creation of personal games.

Their contributions are their games, certainly, but also their voices, bringing forward a plurality of perspectives not typically found in the mainstream of games culture⁸. However, the response to this Twine revolution and its queering of digital games has been mixed, and provides insights into the power of the contributions of these games and game-makers.

THE LEGITIMACY OF TWINE GAMES

“these creators and their games are still often trapped on the outside. Despite being beautiful works, their games are often dismissed as being too short, too simple, too straightforward or simply not even games at all” (Keogh, 2013)

The use of the word “game” to describe the products of Twine development is contentious. Bernardi (2013) notes that even before Anthropy’s evangelization of Twine many “serious” indie developers regarded it with “disdain”. The accessibility of this tool means that many people without the various types of capital required to get into game design have done so, which has resulted in the participation and visibility of a number of people from often-marginalized communities. Combined with the frequently queer content of these games, it may come as no surprise that the response to the Twine revolution has been mixed, a reception that resonates with the queering of other media before games, including film and video⁹. For instance, negative responses to the claim that everyone can make games (see for example Adamkiewicz, 2012) tend to be met with a valorization of digital games that are “hard to make”, leading to the devaluation of accessibility and ease of use (Houlden, 2012). There have been a number of heated discussions about whether games that do not replicate the values inherent within games culture, such as play difficulty, programming abilities, or high-level graphics, should be called games at all, or classified instead as interactive fiction. Alexander (2013a) sees this rhetorical debate as part of the growing pains of the video game medium, an ideologically-fuelled wrestling match for power by those whose pleasures and pastimes have historically been demonized. kopas (2012) links the desire to police boundaries around games and “not games” to what we have come to expect of games made by a narrow range of producers, a perspective that highlights the wide-reaching implications of the hegemony of play and its power elite of game-makers even beyond the corporate sphere of production. As a result, the response to the queering of game design afforded by Twine has varied.

As noted, positive media coverage of Twine has referred to its rising profile as “The Twine Revolution”, a heady label that celebrates a number of powerful concepts, including democratization, inclusivity, openness and diversity. In conjunction with the large-scale, mainstream discussions related to gender-based harassment and exclusion noted in the introduction, it would be

8. See for example Porpentine & kopas (2013) as well as the contributions to *re/Action zine* at <http://www.reactionzine.com/>

9. For a review of the marginalization and delegitimization of queer film and video festivals, see the January 2008 issue of *GBL: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*

satisfying to say that the industry has reached a turning point and has “woke[n] up” (Hamilton, 2013). This is particularly true given the attention paid to the topics of diversity and inclusion at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in 2013, a gathering that up until that point had been seen as a culminating celebration befitting an industry plagued by accusations of being exclusionary and conservative. In a 2012 interview, Anthropy described her experience of GDC as a “deliberately sheltered” space (Weiss, 2012). GDC 2013 seemed to be a qualitatively different experience, one not of reversal entirely but with a sense of incipient change. Hamilton (2013) and Alexander (2013b), both games journalism veterans, reflected on this feeling of transformation at this incarnation of GDC. The difference stemmed from the fact that gender, sexuality and race were discussed outside of special interest sessions dedicated to identity politics, and that one of the most enduring tropes of digital games design-- ultraviolent content-- was challenged. It was different that some of the most visible queer game-makers spoke on panels, and had their work cited by other game designers. And difference was implicit in the act of Richard Hofmeier, winner of the Independent Games Festival (IGF) grand prize, spray-painting his booth, replacing his game *Cart Life* with Porpentine’s Twine game *Howling Dogs*. As Petit (2013) notes, this was a powerful statement about the legitimacy of Twine games, and that “the creative work of a self-identified queer tranarchafeminist like Porpentine should be showcased and engaged with and celebrated just as much as the work of any other creator or the members of any other group”. Petit indicates how the identities of these makers matter, as up until then their contributions were frequently excluded and denigrated.

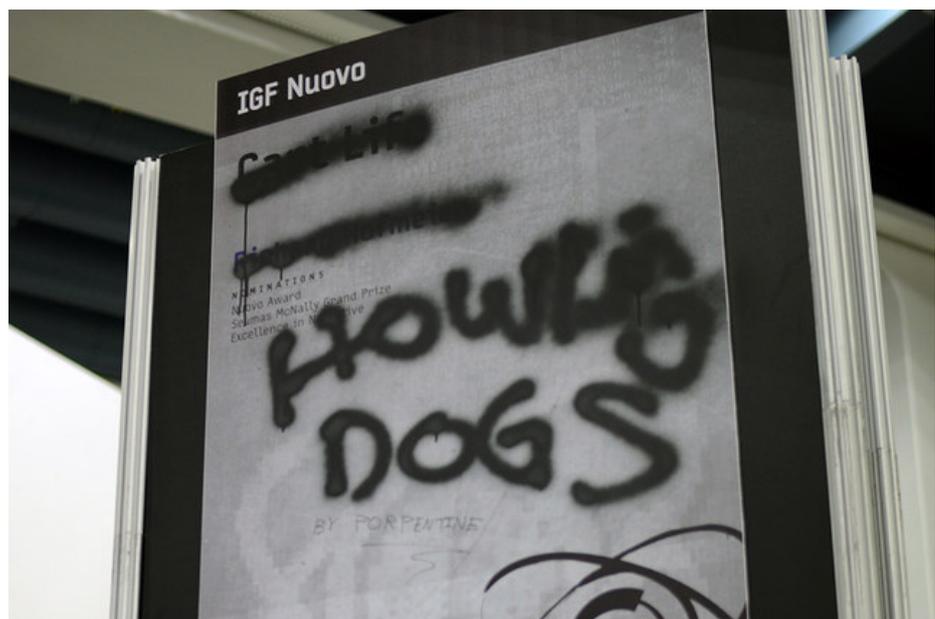


Figure 1 – Retrieved from <http://gamechurch.com/seeking-the-face-of-god-an-interview-with-cart-lifes-richard-hofmeier>

This citation and naming is important, because to be queer is still political, and the significance of this naming becomes clear when it does not happen. For instance, Kellee Santiago, an often-cited example of a woman finding success in the mainstream game industry, paraphrased Porpentine's statement about queer women and women of color making games simply as "different and innovative games are being made every day"¹⁰. Santiago's rhetorical maneuver works to soften what are deeply political contributions -- the participation of marginalized people in digital games production. Addressing these game-makers with industry buzzwords (and political panacea) such as diversity and innovation rather than as women, queer, trans*, of color or feminist, results in the depoliticization of the still-radical nature of their participation. It also demonstrates how the discourses of democratization can allow the industry to co-opt this work, nullifying the subversive challenge Twine and queer game design make to the norms and traditions of the mainstream sphere, which is deeply heteronormative. However, queer game design is a domain that resists co-optation in a number of important ways, which I discuss below.

THE ECONOMIES OF QUEER GAME PRODUCTION

In his opening editorial on indie game studies, Bart Simon (2013) noted the centrality of the context of the production in this type of scholarly analysis, and the importance of considering "the specificities of all games-as-made" (p.3). The milieu of Twine design, and queer game design broadly, not only entails but requires such analysis, since a key component of their challenge to the hegemony of play is how these practices are not only premised on access to the means of production but also fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-reproduction tactics. These practices run counter to prevalent independent game design rhetoric (exemplified in *Indie Game: The Movie*), which sees the activities of do-it-yourself game-making as a means by which to create a "successful" game, defined through a limited set of criteria. Success in this domain is measured according to a set of standardized benchmarks, including popularity, fame and, of course, sales/financial success. Twine games, on the other hand, stand outside these traditional ways of understanding success and undermine its logic, becoming a part of the "assemblage of resistant technologies" that constitute queerness (Halberstam, 2011, p.29).

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam considers a range of texts, including animated films, to explore methods of being and knowing that do not conform to status quo ways of defining success, including reproduction and capital accumulation, in order to take apart "the logics of success and failure with which we currently live" (Halberstam, 2011, p.2). While digital games are not part of the book's analysis, in an interview with LeJacq (2012) Halberstam considers the queerness of digital games in general, seeing some resonance there but also limitations given that they are "a straight, white-guy world" characterized by a fear of intimacy.

10. According to daphny (2013, 29 March) "porp said «queer women and women of color are making games every day» [and] santiago quoted «different and innovative games are made every day»". [Twitter post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/daphaknee/status/317731302461825024>.

In the communities of game-making at the periphery, especially personal games, we might find a better example of how digital games might encapsulate the queer art of failure, in rejecting challenge and thus validations of hegemonic masculinity, as Anthropy notes (Spiro, 2012). Beyond their content, Twine games turn away from the orthodox path of traditional success. They are not produced with the intention of getting into the mainstream industry or even making sales, as many Twine designers see the industry as the problem motivating their work rather than a place to aspire to. Instead Twine games are created for a multiplicity of “unprofitable” reasons and purposes abstracted from either accumulation of capital or reproduction. They resist commodification. And their production occurs through an ecosystem of tactics that provide Twine designers support for their work while still challenging the hegemony of mainstream games production.

Twine game designers operate within an alternative economy of their own making, one characterized by non-normative means of financial support, distribution, and dissemination. Requesting money to play Twine games is rare, and in the case where compensation is sought, it tends to take the form of donations and pay-what-you-can, often with a portion of funds going to relevant charities (see for example *Depression Quest*¹¹). A barter or goodwill system is also observable in the frequent collaborations between Twine designers, musicians, artists, and writers. And of course, as in the case of more mainstream independent and even now triple-A or blockbuster titles, crowdfunding via Kickstarter and Indiegogo is a method by which to secure the funds necessary to develop a game. In the case of the queer game developer, however, the use of crowdfunding goes beyond seeking start-up capital, as it has also been used to sustain the distribution and dissemination channels of this sphere of development. Two recent examples are the Indiegogo campaigns for *re/Action zine*¹² and *Imagining Better Futures through Play*, part of the Allied Media Conference¹³. Zines, non-industry conferences, and the growing breed of “unconferences” (such as *Lost Levels*¹⁴) are a counter-hegemonic response to the often hyper-professionalized nature of mainstream digital games events. They have provided venues for Twine designers and other queer game-makers to discuss their work, the milieu of game design, and tactics and strategies for coalition-building, providing a range of perspectives on games that have been typically excluded from the traditional, popular venues. But what fills the gaps in between these events and slightly more formal channels for dialogue is the use of social media to construct a queer game design community. In an interview with Keogh (2013), Twine designer merritt kopas cites the centrality of social networking, including Twitter, tumblr, and personal websites, for the growth of the queer game design community, many of whose members are prolific users of these tools.

11. Payment details available at

<http://www.depressionquest.com/>

12. Campaign can be seen at http://

www.indiegogo.com/projects/

reaction-2013-fundraiser

13. Campaign can be seen at http://

www.indiegogo.com/projects/

imagining-better-futures-through-

play

14. Event details can be found at

<http://www.lostlevels.net/>

What these sites and practices indicate is a way for digital game designers who have been excluded from the mainstream system to create, expand, and promote their own economy of production. However, the precarity of these practices, particularly the modes of funding, is striking. They tend to be contingent on goodwill, just enough, temporary measures, a reality that begs the question of sustainability and the livelihoods of these game designers.

MOVING FORWARD

The tactics, techniques, and practices I have discussed above, as well as their contributions, are not unique to Twine production, as Twine is but one example of accessible game design and its plural community of makers. But what I have hoped to indicate through these specific examples in the tenuous relationship between the queering of game design within the broader ideology of game design. Queerness acts as a destabilizing force, challenging norms of who gets to be a producer and what should be made, but it is wrought with the dangers and precarity of this position. Operating beyond hegemonic spheres of production and reproduction entails a number of real risks, and we should be careful not to equate emancipatory promise with poorly paid, insecure work and life below, on, or near the poverty line, dependent on the vicissitudes of crowdfunding. Furthermore, it would be fallacious to conclude that the discussions and developments explored in this paper indicate that the binaries established in digital game culture are crumbling, crushed by the Twine Revolution. While queerness is becoming pervasive in games culture, just as in other areas of heteronormative everyday life it is often effaced, targeted, reappropriated, and depoliticized.

As such, it is important to attend to the communities of practice in digital games that do not fulfill the standardized criteria for laying claim to the territory of the mainstream. When talking about game play, we tend to reify a particular identity that is constructed through a market logic (Shaw, 2013), when perhaps we should be more critical of the criteria one must fulfill when laying claim to an identity within digital game culture, be it gamer or game designer. Shaw posits that the flaw of the normatively defined gamer identity is that it is one constructed through the lens of good consumption and intelligible participation in capitalism. Though Shaw is talking about gameplay activities rather than game-making practices, this is an important rejoinder for those discussing the production of digital games, and how we identify and discuss those who engage in these activities. Game designer is a politicized position to take just as gamer is, and henceforth too little scholarly attention has been paid to those making games outside of the dominant, professional, and industrial context. We need to address what constitutes our dominant construction of game designer and challenge those rubrics in order to understand the subversive and radical contributions of those who do not align with the normative constitution of the producer.

In accounting for these different modes of production and participation, however, we must be careful to not broaden the definition of game-maker to encompass this production, as this could entail further depoliticization of these queer contributions. Instead, let us consider the ways in which these digital games, game-makers, game-making communities, game-making tools, and discussions about games culture highlight the limiting, exclusionary, and violent boundaries around mainstream video games, and the consequences of these borders for people's emotional, physical, economic, and social well-being.

Game-making on the periphery is clearly fraught with significant challenges. Free labour in the digital game industry, from user-generated content to machinima, as well as the recent surge in incubators for first-time game-makers often support capital's reliance on free labour's commodities (Kline, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2003; Harvey & Fisher, 2013). And yet at the same time capital creates the tools necessary for autonomy and challenge, and potentially the means of exodus from contemporary global capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). While this in theory is compelling, there are even more basic challenges here, those that are endemic to anti-capitalist practices and being queer in this world—poverty and violence. In the introduction to her game *Parasite*, Porpentine (2013) asks: “What does it mean to make games when we're unhealthy? When we're under threat of violence? When we're hungry? When we have no money?” These are not hypothetical questions. And the emancipatory possibilities of queer game-making do not provide an adequate answer when the sustainability of this life for many of these game-makers is a constant source of fear.

In sum, there is no easy conclusion here. We must be attuned to other kinds of game-makers and the challenge their participation can make, but academic validation is in its own way a conservative, normative frame with which to understand these communities and practices, as we too often reaffirm increasingly depoliticized concepts such as diversity and accessibility in our examinations of the peripheries. The alternative, however, is still unclear. I suggest we open a discussion about this, not just amongst ourselves but with the communities we examine, whoever they are. If they are at the periphery, they likely face similar issues of precarity. What do we as researchers with access to all the privileges of the academic sphere do after identifying these practices, spaces and challenges? What interventions do we undertake? And how do we ensure that in our examinations of marginalized practices, we do not simply reaffirm their marginality or, alternately, attempt to reconcile them with dominant, mainstream activities? Is the question “what can we do?” actually paternalism exemplified?

By way of conclusion, let us return to one key observation. The queering of game design troubles dominant power relations, highlighting their instability through the sheer effort made to depoliticize and co-opt this work. The game is changing, regardless of the blockbuster-fixated, conservative, risk-averse monolithic structure characterizing a great deal of the mainstream industry, whose challengers are often those in the most precarious positions in society. But we must not lose sight of the cost of these contributions.

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